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Attempts to combine language and composition in the freshman English course at Gustavus Adolphus College (St. Peter, Minnesota) should interest all teachers of English. One project utilized a single key word for several assignments. Students were asked to (1) think through the meaning of the word for a week and write definitions and associations, (2) consult dictionaries to differentiate connotative and denotative definitions, (3) collect definitions and usages from their peers, (4) consider possible bases for definition classification, (5) trace the word in the "New English Dictionary," and (6) compile citations of uses of the word encountered in print. An alternative assignment [illegible] passage. One nonhistorical approach involved an analysis of words used in advertisements. In other instances, studying the origins of place names led to the compilation of linguistic atlases, and an essay assignment encouraged students to project generalizations about language after reading "local color" fiction. The limited and frequently erroneous conclusions which resulted became the bases for further discussions. (RD)

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LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION: DOES THE SUBJECT MATTER?

By GERHARD T. ALEXIS
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"Call me Ishmael," familiar enough as the beginning of a great novel, might introduce as well almost any teacher of freshman English, for in the continuing confusion his hand is likely to be against every man, and every man's hand is against him. If he contends that the course should deal mainly with writing he will encounter someone else who denies that the art of composition can be taught, or hear from still another that his students come adequately prepared for writing which has become a subordinate, if still respectable, part of a course which focuses upon literature, say, or Great Ideas, or Burning Social Issues. Nor is that teacher any hidden persuader who claims that the proper study is language itself, and that solid work in linguistics will lead us all out of the wilderness. Still others, weary of uncertainty, suggest in the words of a once popular song, "Let's call the whole thing off."

Most of us, however, are probably convinced of the importance of what we are doing in freshman English, even when we change our pattern from year to year. Perhaps whatever is, is right, but this assertion finds little favor in our time. My contention at the moment is that the same vigorous arguments which reveal our disagreement about course content indicate our continuing interest and commitment. I think it is fair to say that here at Gustavus, where the ten of us in English have adjoining offices and share responsibility for the freshman work, conversation in offices, hallways, and around the coffee urn is more likely to turn to the promise and perplexities of "Language and Composition" than to anything else we teach singly or in common. As Professor Prausnitz wrote in Minnesota English (April, 1966, p. 17), "The freshman course is the single most important course taught in the department." Perhaps an expanded conversation in print can serve to inform one another of our various attempts, successful or not. On that assumption, at any rate, I should like to say something of what we are trying to do here and mention several assignments intended to fit our program. That program, as will be obvious, is neither wholly original nor of interest only to the English teacher at the college level.

A catalog description, despite being commonly a combination of hope and self-induced delusion, may supply useful clues. Ours says in part of our "Language and Composition" course for freshmen, "Designed to develop competence and sophistication in written expression, through the study of rhetorical principles and ...through readings on the nature of language, including the structure of English and problems in usage." What emerges from both the title and the partial description is a dual commitment to the practice of writing and the study of language. They are not to be disjunctive but in some workable sense complementary. (The rule of thumb within the department is that we give each concern equal time in our class discussions and that at least half of the theme assignments relate specifically to language.) The challenge to each of us is to find ever more effective ways to combine, not separate, what might seem relatively disparate objectives.

Let me then present several of my attempts, for which I make no grandiose claims. Suppose the rhetoric text (and therefore the class, no doubt!) has had a chapter or section on definition: one might appropriately ask the students to define some term, and our particular text has suggestions ranging from tragedy to the Absurd. Very possibly a discussion of classification follows, and here, for topics, the world is all before us. There could be, then, two writing assignments on as many methods of exposition, but the two would not necessarily have any mutual relationship, nor would either have to involve the history of a word, or its connotations, or its meanings in differing contexts. Could we define and/or classify in ways that would require closer attention to the subject matter of language itself?

In the attempt to do this and to get the students to think, investigate, and discover more on their own, I tried using a single key word for several related assignments. During one week students were to think through what the term Puritan meant to them--no other person, no book, was to be consulted--and then set it all down in writing. What resulted was a sort of outpouring of definition by extension which, while not completely without merit, tended to slight any venture toward logical definition and with fine careless rapture identified connotative meanings with the denotative. This led us to the desk dictionary to discover what more specific or objective range of meaning there might be.

Next I sent them out as wolves in the midst of sheep to engage fellow students in contrived conversations

calculated to elicit others' candid definitions of Puritan and its related forms. Amateurish as the whole endeavor was, it was nevertheless a speech situation which led to direct involvement--and sometimes ingenuity and skill--on the part of each freshman who tried to get ten unsuspecting Gustavians to define Puritan without their knowing it. Of course what happened eventually was that not all approaches were equally indirect, and students who had been hunted down once or twice became gun-shy. Members of the class still managed to amass a good deal of material, all bearing on definition and all in need of some sort of classification. The basis was up to each writer. Should the responses be cast into simple dichotomies, favorable--unfavorable, historical--current? Should there be adjacent pigeon-holes labeled according to the focus, such as religious, political, social, moral? Classification, it seemed, involved analysis.

Students had written the first compositon more or less dutifully, but the second awakened most to realize what a surprising and exciting range of meanings may be attached to a word, and there was a certain personal satisfaction in the staging of the interviews. (These took a good deal of time as well, complained a few.) The many possible bases of classification led to considerable class discussion. A next step, tracing our key word in the NED, struck most of them as humdrum, for at the outset the dictionary is likely to be regarded as a handy place to get an authoritative answer fast, and it takes a while before a series of massive volumes appears as one of the most absorbing means of discovering where we are by realizing where we have been. Nor did the class respond at first with much enthusiasm to the project announced as the basis for the term research paper: namely, the compilation over many weeks of a file card for every citation to Puritan encountered in the student's reading, assigned and leisure, scholarly quarterlies and Sunday supplements, from Homer to Hefner, so to speak. And yet, if they were not so many Squire Westerns, ready to turn from all other pursuits at the sound of the horn, they came to sense something of the lure of the hunt, and by the time they had gathered the material and arranged it, and had illustrated and documented their observations of possible meanings of Puritan, they had at least made a start toward an investigation of language where the results had not been specifically provided by some linguistic authority beforehand.

An alternate and less protracted exercise in our changing language was the assignment of a close examination of Ephesians 2 in six versions of the Bible:

the Douay, King James, RSV, Phillips, New English, and American Bible Society. This was basically an historical survey which compared the versions on stylistic and lexical bases. Library resources this time ranged from the NED to the New York Times on microfilm (for reviews of some recent versions). And more than one student discovered the Xerox copier as he set up his own system of parallel texts.

It goes without saying that such assignments about language are exercises in the art of writing in addition to being fact-finding expeditions. One must organize material, establish some central idea, define terms, and employ with some skill whichever methods of exposition are most appropriate. He must even, if I may borrow some phrasing, write in a selection of language really used by men while providing some coloring of imagination for the subject matter of language, an objective that some linguists seem to consider inappropriate.

Concern with language as subject matter for writing is not confined, of course, to historical approaches: far from it. What are the verbal appeals that go with the shiny new car in the advertisement? Thunderbird--"the car created for the few" and "loved by discerning Americans"! Toiletries "created," again, "for those immaculate men who will settle for nothing less than an air of effortless elegance"! I got some lively essays on these very claims. Or the opportunity for an exercise in semantics is almost forced upon one when some public-spirited message comes along, such as last October's full-page newspaper and magazine advertisement by the Tobacco Institute. This was a reprint of a front-page editorial in Barron's, with a text so slanted it was hard to take seriously. Before turning the students loose on a written analysis of bias words I selected one sentence for class discussion: "While Barron's tends to disapprove of bureaucracy and all its works, the foregoing passages, taken from a recent Federal Trade Commission Report to Congress, unmistakably smack of talent." We spent ten or fifteen minutes on that one sentence, as I recall. "Bureaucracy" did not take long; "smack of talent" was a bit less obvious; what took the time was that innocuous little trailer, "and all its works." After that we debated the extent to which a dimly perceived allusion could contribute to slanted writing.

An examination of place names is an aspect of language study which, like many others, sounds uninspired until the student gets to work. Our language reader included one essay which gave passing

attention to place names. As an outgrowth of class discussion, I asked each student to draw a circle around his home town, suggesting as a starter a twenty-five mile radius. The distance is arbitrary, the only consideration being that of getting an adequate list of place names. Once again the would-be writer began with detail work, the listing of cities and towns within the circle, and perhaps lakes and bogs as well. Once again he confronts the problem of classification: is he to use Mencken's convenient listing in The American Language or set up one of his own? What are the sources of information? What reasoning, known or imagined, led to some of these names? Which might call for some colorful bits of narrative? What can be done to make of the whole essay something other than a reference list or postal guide? More than one young writer found emerging from behind the most pedestrian names the memory and myth of settler and Indian, promoter and politician, and a sense as well of the very shape of the land.

In my observation students respond readily to questions and curious illustrations in linguistic geography. How do we say, "I shall marry merry Mary"? For me there is no phonetic difference in the last three words, and the same was true in one class for all but a single student. She was from Vermont and thought our pronunciation ridiculous. Our interest in dialect study and in research methods for the linguistic atlases led me to attempt another essay assignment this past semester. The students were in no position to travel about the country to assemble data on lexical, phonetic, or morphological differences in dialect, nor did they have adequate training to do so. (Neither have I.) But might it be possible, as a sort of calculated risk, to use the raw material compiled by others for a different purpose in order to make some linguistic generalizations of our own?

I decided to try it over a period of several weeks. We put on open-shelf reserve a number of anthologies of local color fiction, for here was an attempt, at least, to reproduce the oddities in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar typical of some clearly specified section of our country. That there would be serious limitations was apparent from the start: much of the material was dated, the writer's knowledge of the speech of his characters had to be taken on trust, spelling pronunciation was inadequate as phonetic transcription, and the sampling that students could do would be hardly extensive enough for sound generalization. But with the common understanding that we were operating within such clearly recognized limitations, we went ahead.

The students generally enjoyed reading the stories as a change of pace. Most of them had no trouble compiling a respectable mass of citations, too, but some of the conclusions to which these led stopped hardly short of chaos. Should freshmen have known that dialogue in Hawthorne would be a poor index to the speech of New England? Perhaps they should have had a wider range of foreign languages; one wrote that "in California the influence was Spanish: 'canon' for 'canyon.'" Perhaps they should have been able to recognize eye-spellings, as in "I do believe, Hanner, you think 'riginal sin is nothin' but a bad stomick." Other curious statements showed that there was a need to cover the linguistic ground more thoroughly. "In a story set in Massachusetts," one student discovered, 'ketched' is used instead of 'caught,' showing an ignorance of past tense forms." (An ignorance of whose past tense forms?) Or, again, "The mid-westerners speak what could be considered plain English. There is no accent to speak of." (Plains English might almost have been more defensible, and as for that unintended play on words at the end...!)

A trained linguist might have been distressed by both methods and results, but I do not regard the assignment as a wretched failure. Two pages of dittoed statements like those just quoted gave us material for several days of valuable reappraisal. Students were more aware of dialect differences of various kinds, even to the point of detecting some in a largely homogeneous college population. Their insights had been derived, at least to some slight extent, from what they felt to be their own discoveries. One girl concluded, "People, no matter where or how they live, almost always think their way of talking is right; speech that doesn't match their own instantly becomes peculiar.... These same people fail to realize that a 'correct' dialect just doesn't exist; they continue to think their own is 'correct,' and anything else is inferior." The assessment may not have been original, but it was hers.

Now to make an end where I began. I do not contend that writing, which is hard work, suddenly becomes fun when its subject matter is language. It is hard work still. I do not contend that every student has stood up to cheer at the announcement of each new topic or that every essay cheered me. I do not contend that writing about language is the one way to handle freshman English. I do say that it is possible to develop greater competence and confidence in students who with

some sense of discovery write about that basic resource, their language. This is one path, at least, in the wilderness.

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